▼ ▼ ▼ CHAPTER 5

Early African-American Arts

Africans were forcibly brought to the New World and made to practice customs that were new and strange to them. Because of this, for a long time people thought African heritage had been lost. In recent years, we have learned that this was not true. Many traditions survived the rough passage across the ocean. In some cases, traditions and customs have been transformed. In some cases, they were borrowed by whites. Other customs are virtually unchanged even after hundreds of years. Customs were temporarily misplaced, not lost.

Every ethnic group has something special to offer. In this chapter, we will look at the cultural heritage that Africans brought to America. The part of the culture we will look at is the arts. This includes literature, music, handicrafts, food preparation, and architecture.

Literature

After their arrival in the New World, few Africans had the chance to learn to read and write. The telling of stories had always been an important part of their culture. Before long, laws were passed which made it illegal to teach enslaved Africans to read and write. Then the telling of stories became an important way to keep their African culture alive. Sometimes enslaved Africans told the stories through music. As stories were passed on from one person to another, the stories often changed. Sometimes they were improved, but the basic ideas remained important. The folklore of a number of West African societies, including the Mandinka, the Hausa, and the Fulani, became part of American culture. Tales of hares and of tricksters were common. These evolved into stories about "Brer Rabbit." You will read more about those later in the book. The "Anansi the Spider" stories of the Akan are familiar to many young people even today. If you look, you can find many of these stories in libraries or in bookstores.

We have only a few records of the thoughts and feelings of African-Americans during the early days. However, those who could take pen to paper preserved a few of the stories of early African-Americans for us. The story of Louisa Picquet, an enslaved African-American, helps us understand how much people suffered when separated from their families. She was born in Columbia and sold four times during her childhood. Sold away from her mother in New Orleans, Picquet was freed after her master's death. She moved to Ohio. There she married a free African-American. Perhaps she could have been happy with her freedom. But she longed to find her mother. She searched for many years. Just before the Civil War, she found her. Sadly, Louisa Picquet did not have enough money to purchase her mother's freedom. With the help of her husband, she campaigned to raise money. Finally, mother and daughter were reunited. Her story was published as a series of interviews between Louisa and an AME minister. People who read the interviews felt great sadness and horror at what she had suffered. They helped persuade the AME Church to take a stronger public stand against enslavement.

Music

Africans brought their distinctive musical traditions with them. Rhythm was important in African music. People would either clap their hands or play drums and other instruments. They used different combinations of beats. Many African songs have harmony,

where one person sings and other people repeat the phrases or add a chorus. These patterns and this repetition became part of American music.

Most of the music of enslaved African-Americans probably was vocal. The style of singing that Africans liked best was the "call and response" or "leader/chorus" style. A leader would sing or call out a line, and the group would repeat it or respond to it. Back and forth the song would go.

Enslaved African-Americans sang while they worked. Songs expressed both happiness and sadness. The tradition of singing while working was African. Work songs dealt with all kinds of topics, from chopping wood to pulling barges. The tempo of the various songs matched the speed at which work was done. It helped keep the work at a proper pace. It also helped pass the time at work that was often quite dull and hard. Singing and laughter often went together, for music was a way to lighten the load and forget troubles for awhile. The custom of singing while working continued even after the Civil War anywhere people worked together. Most African-Americans in the South still worked on farms where group labor was often used.

Play songs were used for games and for lighter activities. These songs also influenced the later development of spirituals, blues, and gospel music. One scholar, Charles Joyner, believes that through the later revival meetings, white religious music picked up the most popular characteristics of African music. These included the "leader/chorus" style we have already mentioned. In the American South, African music blended with European forms. The blending created a unique African-American Southern music.

The early dances and music had African features. So did children's "ring games," where children stood in a circle and played different games. People who study African culture have noticed that the "religious shout" had African origins. The religious shout was very similar to the frenzied circle dances used in Africa for both religious and nonreligious purposes. The term "saut," or "shout," meant to "walk or run around." A "shout" was a dance that overflowed with energy and joy. The shout was full of cries of happiness. This dance was an almost frantic religious response to the receiving of the word of God. Sometimes religious conversion ceremonies used the shout. Even after converting to Christianity, enslaved African-Americans would worship as they had in Africa, singing and dancing. They clapped their hands or stomped their feet when they had no drums.

A "call," which was like a loud yell or scream, had several purposes. It could be used to get someone's attention or to let off steam. While no one is quite sure of the origin of spirituals, some scholars think that the first ones developed out of the "calls and hollers." As Africans learned English, they added English words. The words may have been English, but the way the words were pronounced and the repetition in singing phrases of words over and over again were African.

Some scholars think that spirituals developed from the hymns and psalms sung by African-Americans. You may remember that few efforts were made to convert the first arrivals. By the mid-1700s, this had changed. Enslaved African-Americans were being converted to Christianity. They began to sing the white hymns. Singing was one way to express their sadness without upsetting the whites. The hymns were English, but they added African elements, such as humming and singing in falsetto.

Spirituals were very popular among the enslaved African-Americans. They told of the better world that awaited the believer "by and by." They also reminded the singers and listeners of the behavior that was needed to get them to that world. Finally, the songs spoke of God's justice and the fate of those lost in sin. Some have said that these songs were a way of forgetting troubles. Others say they were used to build up the self-esteem of the enslaved by reminding them of Jesus' love and the equality of all in God's eyes. Both are correct. African-Americans found both relief from their burdens and hope for a better day in these songs. They also expressed the idea that those who had treated them in unchristian ways would feel God's wrath some day. The songs promised that they would not always be enslaved.

The masters heard these songs too. So the words could not be too clear. Consider the words in this song.

"Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land.
Tell old Pharaoh, let my people go."

God is talking to Moses, as in the book of Exodus in the *Bible.* Pharaoh is the king of Egypt, who holds God's people in slavery. But for the African-Americans who sang this song, Pharaoh referred to their masters or white people in general. God wanted them to be let go from slavery! One day—soon they hoped—He would make it happen. Many saw the Civil War as God's answer to their prayers for freedom.

Spirituals came to the attention of the white American public during and after the Civil War. Some music collectors first heard the songs sung by African-Americans rowing them from Beaufort to St. Helena across Port Royal Sound. The custom of singing while rowing originated in Africa. One person would sing the melody. Then each of the other rowers would sing a different part of the song. No doubt singing while working made the rowing easier. "Michael Row the Boat Ashore" is said to have been a popular rowing song, especially when the rowing was hard. You might imagine yourself rowing as you sing this song.

Charlotte Forten, a free African-American from the North, came to St. Helena Island to teach. Due to health problems, she stayed only eighteen months. During that time she collected many spirituals. *The Atlantic Monthly* published them in May of 1864. A number of white Northerners who were in the South also collected spirituals. In June of 1867, *The Atlantic Monthly* published the spirituals collected by Thomas W. Higginson. He had commanded African-American troops in South Carolina. You will learn about him and his troops in the next chapter.

The words and meanings of the songs were often misunderstood because they were in Gullah. The whites who collected the spirituals did not understand Gullah. They thought it was merely improperly spoken English. Actually, Gullah has many African words. The collectors also lost much of the way the music sounded. Because tape recorders did not exist, we may never know for sure what the music sounded like.

After the Civil War, African-Americans formed their own churches. Now they could include their own traditions in their religious music. They did foot-stomping and hand-clapping while they sang. Many songs were quite dramatic. Many were sad. Some songs were much like the old work songs, but others were more like European music. This second kind of song became quite popular during Reconstruction. Groups like the Fisk Jubilee Singers from Tennessee popularized these songs. One popular spiritual was "No More Auction Block for Me (Many Thousand Gone)." Some think this song was the basis for the world famous civil rights song "We Shall Overcome."

During their enslavement, many African-Americans learned to play musical instruments. When they had a little free time, enslaved African-Americans enjoyed dancing and playing homemade fiddles. At Christmas and Easter, many African-Americans were given more time off. They celebrated this festive time with the music of fiddles and sometimes banjos.

Enslaved African-Americans with a musical bent sometimes were taught to play so they could entertain the planters and their friends. Most of the fiddlers were probably taught to play by other enslaved African-Americans. Sometimes enslaved musicians were hired out. At casual social events in the towns and on the plantations, they played a variety of instruments, including fiddles, flutes, and French horns. Planter families enjoyed dancing to the "jigs." These jigs were very much like traditional African music. Musicians played several notes repetitively in a monotone. They held the bow or stick, in the right hand, and knocked or bounced it softly against the strings. The effect was much like that of a drum.

Sometimes planters and their friends asked enslaved African-Americans to sing for them. The term "juba" had a long tradition going back to the Bantu language. It came from the African word "giouba." This referred to an African dance often performed in South Carolina and the West Indies. The term also had several other meanings, including to beat time or to pat. Among enslaved African-Americans, juba came to refer to leftovers which were all mixed together at the end of the week for a meal. Eating mixed together leftovers that may have been partially spoiled was bad enough. But in addition, enslaved African-Americans had to sing songs and play African games for the entertainment of the planters. Enslaved people often made up a song with a double meaning to help them get through this event. The song

expressed their feelings without letting the whites know what they meant. They sang variations on this song with such excitement and cheer that sometimes the owners had them perform it for guests. Older people tapped on their legs with a drum-like rhythm while younger people danced.

Enslaved African-Americans were sometimes exposed to classical music while traveling with their masters or attending the young men away at school. As skilled musicians, African-Americans learned to play classical music quickly. Sometimes they played it for whites at more formal occasions. Sometimes African-American fiddlers played classical pieces before the start of theater productions.

Musical Instruments

A number of musical instruments were popular. Some scholars think that African instruments were actually brought over on the ships with the first captives. Of all the African instruments, drums were the most important. As we have already noted, drums were used for communication as well as for music. In Africa, a wide variety of drums were used in music-making. In America the materials used to make the drums were different, but the traditions remained. We have learned a little about how drums were made from an old drum found in Virginia. This drum was probably made before the year 1700 and was placed in the British Museum in London in 1753. The drum was made of American materials, cedar and deerskin. But it is distinctly African in style.

Masters banned drums because they feared drums would be used to carry messages of revolt. In the early 1700s, English planters banned drums in the West Indies. French and Spanish speaking colonies, however, rarely banned drums. As we mentioned in an earlier chapter, South Carolina banned drums, horns, and other "loud instruments" in 1740 after the Stono Rebellion. Before that time, enslaved Africans were often military drummers. After 1740, records rarely mention drummers until the American Revolution. However, Europeans welcomed Africans as drummers in military bands. During the Revolutionary War in America, a number of enslaved African-Americans escaped enslavement in Charleston and became drummers in the Hessian regiments who fought on the British side.

Even when drums were banned among the enslaved African-Americans, people found other ways to create a drum sound. They either clapped their hands or used common everyday items. Scholars think that mortars and pestles, instruments designed for rice cultivation, were used as drums. Mortars were often made out of a hollow log, a fine "instrument" for a drum. Drums also were usually made out of hollow logs in America, a custom that survived into the 1900s along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts.

Cane fifes were first used in Africa, where they were an important part of the music. Brought to the New World, Africans continued to use the same method to make fifes. First, they hollowed out the cane. Then they made holes for fingers and for the mouth. Today fifes and drums are played together for the enjoyment of the listeners. People often think of a fife and drum corps as one of the most American types of musical groups. Perhaps so, but it has African roots.

Most people would be surprised to learn that the ancestor of the hillbilly banjo is African. Records from the time before the American Revolution show enslaved African-Americans playing homemade instruments similar to guitars. The instruments described were made from gourds and had strings. A century later, former enslaved African-Americans recalled using a kind of banjo made from a wood frame. It had strings made of animal gut and animal skins for the head.

The ancestor of the banjo is the one-strand or one-string, which was made of a string stretched out over a board. One-string instruments were common in Africa. This particular instrument makes the "drone" sound which is also found in the banjo. It is also plucked like a banjo. West Africans commonly use several similar instruments. While the modern banjo has evolved and changed, its roots are found across the ocean in Africa.

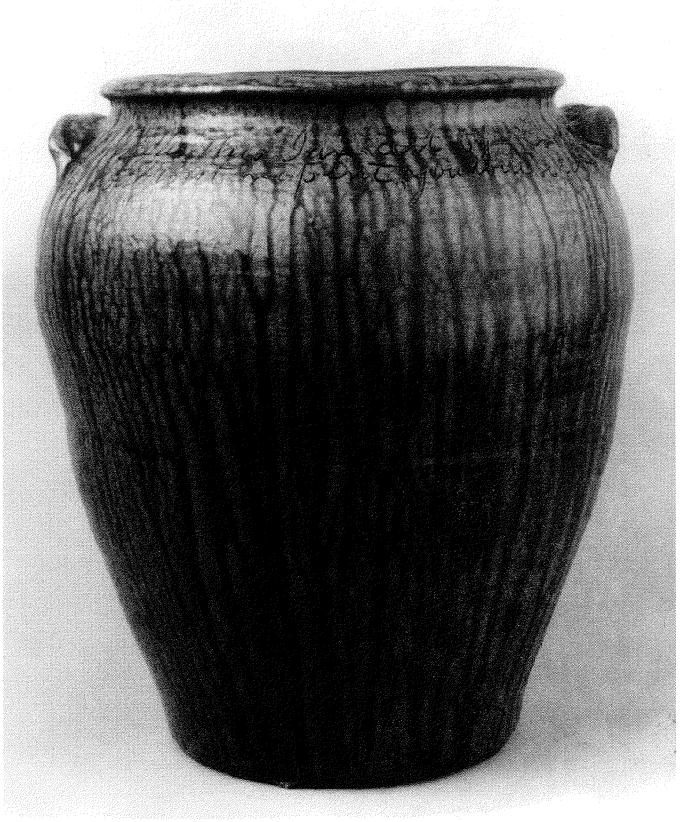
How did the banjo get from the coast to the mountains, where there were few African-Americans? Perhaps African-Americans who took part in building the early railroads in the mountains brought it. Or perhaps it came from the minstrel shows in the

mid-1800s. Minstrels brought the music of enslaved African-Americans to the entire country. Or perhaps the Civil War played a role. People who had no contact with each other before shared traditions. Soldiers may have returned home with a new musical instrument. In any case, over the years white society adopted the banjo as its own. Ironically, this most African instrument is today played by very few African-Americans.

Handicrafts

Because the African-Americans who came to the New World were enslaved, their handicrafts had to be useful rather than decorative. They did not have the luxury of making things that were merely pretty. Many crafts were similar to those in Africa. Showing that a craft or technique was handed down directly from parents to children is not always possible. But we can clearly see that African influences survived enslavement. Today we can appreciate the beauty and usefulness of what is left of these ancient crafts.

African pottery making traditions were quite different than those of Europeans. In Africa, mainly women practiced the art. However, men also were potters in some areas. White owners taught the earliest African-American potters. In the early 1800s, pottery making began in Edgefield and Aiken Counties. The first such pots were made at a place known as Pottersville in Edgefield County. The most famous of the enslaved potters was a man known as Dave the Potter. He learned to read and write through his early work. His owner, Abner Landrum, worked Dave as a typesetter on his newspaper until it went out of business. After that, Landrum put Dave to work in the pottery business. Dave made hundreds of jars, and many of them still exist. We know Dave's work because he signed it with his name, the date, and his owner's initials. Sometimes Dave included a brief poem. The poem told the purpose of the jar. His jars were quite large and unusually wide at the shoulder. One can hold more than forty gallons. It is the largest piece found in the South. Dave must have been a very strong man to handle the amount of clay needed. Dave died at the age of eighty-three. While Dave was the best known, many other enslaved African-Americans worked in the pottery industry of



Dave the Potter Storage Jar, 1862. Alkaline glazed stoneware. Reproduced with permission of Tony and Marie Shank. From "Conflict and Transcendence: African-American Art in South Carolina," organized by the Columbia Museum of Art. Another example of Dave the Potter's work can be seen in slide H-1 The History of the S.C. Slide Collection.

that time. Scholars think that as many as 140 potters were working in the Edgefield area between 1820 and the Civil War. You can see some of their work on display in the McKissick Museum in Columbia and the Edgefield County Museum.

Face vessels are another type of pottery made by many of the Edgefield potters. Face vessels came in a number of sizes. Some were intended as water jugs, some as cups or pitchers. In some cases we do not know how they were intended to be used.

Face vessels have been found all over the United States. Europeans made them for centuries. However, the face vessels found in the Edgefield area have African features. They look a great deal like African art. The style is very much like Bakongo wooden sculptures found in Zaire and Angola. Records confirm that enslaved African-Americans did

(Above) Monkey Jug, made about 1862, maker unknown. Alkaline glazed stoneware, made of kaolin. Reproduced with permission of Tony and Marie Shank. From "Conflict and Transcendence: African American Art in South Carolina," organized by the Columbia Museum of Art. (Right) Sorting the materials for a sweetgrass basket. Skills that came from Africa in making sweetgrass baskets can still be seen today. Photo by Aimee Smith.

this type of work. In the 1800s, enslaved people from that area of Africa were brought to the United States. A group that arrived in the 1850s ended up living in the Edgefield area. They may have influenced the style of pottery.

Another African connection comes from one group of face vessels called "monkey jugs." This term, which had been used since the late 1700s, came from a slang expression for quenching thirst. Monkey jugs were vessels used to hold water. Some think that the enslaved people working in the fields drank water from these vessels. We know that enslaved Africans in the Caribbean made monkey jugs around 1800 or earlier. Many enslaved Africans were brought from the Caribbean to South Carolina. So they may have brought the monkey jug tradition with them. That tradition stretches back to their African ancestors.

Another type of pottery made in the Edgefield area is the figural vessel. Rather than just showing a face, these show a whole body. The true roots of this style are unknown. Europeans had long made pottery that depicted a human being. However, the pottery again bears some resemblance to African art. Enslaved potters may well have taken a European style and adapted it to the art forms with which they were most familiar.

After the Civil War, pottery making became less important in the Edgefield area. African-Americans continued to work in some of the potteries that survived. At least one potter became the owner of his own business in the Greenville area.

The tradition of basketmaking is an old one that survives today. If you take a trip to Charleston, you will see ladies making baskets even now. Today's baskets are mainly decorative. In the early days, they were strictly work-related. Africans brought basketmaking to America when they first arrived. The

People making sweetgrass baskets at the Penn School, St. Helena Island in the early 1900s. The school helped preserve ancient crafts. Courtesy of Howard Woody, the S.C. Postcard Archive, South Caroliniana Library, USC.

coiled-grass baskets made today in South Carolina are very much like the ones made across the ocean in Africa. However, the bread trays, flower baskets, and other items sold now are a modern spinoff of an old craft.

Basket design has changed down through time. The first baskets made by African-Americans were probably "fanners," which are round and wide. As we explained in an earlier chapter, these were used to separate rice grains from the smashed husks. African-Americans made taller baskets for storage purposes. Both of these types of baskets had to last. So they were probably made with stronger materials than you would find in the baskets you could buy today. By the 1700s, people were making both work baskets out of tough materials and "show" baskets from flimsier grasses. Carrying a basket on one's head was customary. Handles were probably not part of the design until the early 1900s.

Men made most of the heavier baskets. Women and children usually made the show baskets. Basketmaking was usually done just before it was time for the harvest. Demand was high. Many enslaved African-Americans made baskets that their masters sold to other plantations. Some of the enslaved African-Americans also made baskets in their free time. These they sold for themselves.

As in Africa, people made baskets for a variety of uses. Baskets were made from different materials and different weaves for storing grain, trapping fish, and storing sewing materials. People "made do" with what they had. Fanners were sometimes even used as cradles for babies. During the Civil War, Jack Frowers, an enslaved African-American on a South Carolina plantation, wove himself a basket boat. He used it to escape to the Union lines. He nailed a piece of wood to the bottom and used pieces of wood to help keep its shape.

After enslavement ended the basketmaking tradition continued. As African-Americans strove to make a living, they used woven baskets to hold fish and produce sold in Charleston. Small farmers needed baskets to carry and store their household goods. Some people made baskets for use on those plantations that survived. Sea Islands residents may have used some baskets in the limited rice production that continued even into the 1900s. Basketmaking became a craft taught at the Penn School near Beaufort

A finished sweetgrass basket shown off by its creator. Today these beautiful baskets are works of art more intended for display rather than every day use. Reproduced from Constance B. Schulz, Ed., The History of S.C. Slide Collection, *slide H-10 (Sandlapper Publishing Company, 1989). Courtesy of S.C. State Museum.*

in 1904. The Penn School's support helped preserve this most African of crafts. We and future generations can appreciate it for a long time to come.

In the late 1800s, when times were hard, basketmaking became a tourist-related activity. People in Mt. Pleasant, near Charleston, began to make sweetgrass baskets and sell them by the road. Eventually entire families became involved in the business. Small children made the bottoms as they learned the skills needed. Few "show baskets" made of the fragile materials survive from old days. Even so, we are fortunate that we can still enjoy these beautiful baskets made by modern basketmakers.

Walking sticks are probably the best known type of African-American woodcarving. African-American walking sticks cannot be directly linked to any African roots because decorated canes are found among the peoples of Europe as well as those of Africa. Carved walking sticks were also common in the West Indies. The canes, usually decorated with snakes, show the woodcarving talents of African-Americans. "Conjure sticks" was the name given to walking canes in South Carolina that had snakes wrapped around them. They may have been used in some way to try to banish illness. Perhaps the designs have their origin in the ancestral homeland, where decorated staffs were sometimes a sign of authority. The sticks did not retain this function in the Americas. But they sometimes were tied to religion and superstition.

Many African-Americans made quilts, both during and after enslavement. Even though quilting is a European technique, African-Americans often decorated the quilts using an African design. Sometimes they used what we might think of as a "crazy quilt" pattern. Many, however, used distinctly American or European patterns. One type of quilt that became very popular among African-Americans on the coast of South Carolina and elsewhere is the strip or string quilt. The quilter sews the pieces into strips. Then the quilter pieces them together into a quilt. African textile workers wove cloth into narrow strips. We do not know whether this technique had a direct influence on the American quilters. But American strip quilts are similar in appearance to these African textiles. Africans commonly improvised and used boldly contrasting designs and colors. We see some of this influence in African-American quilts, especially those made in the Sea Islands.

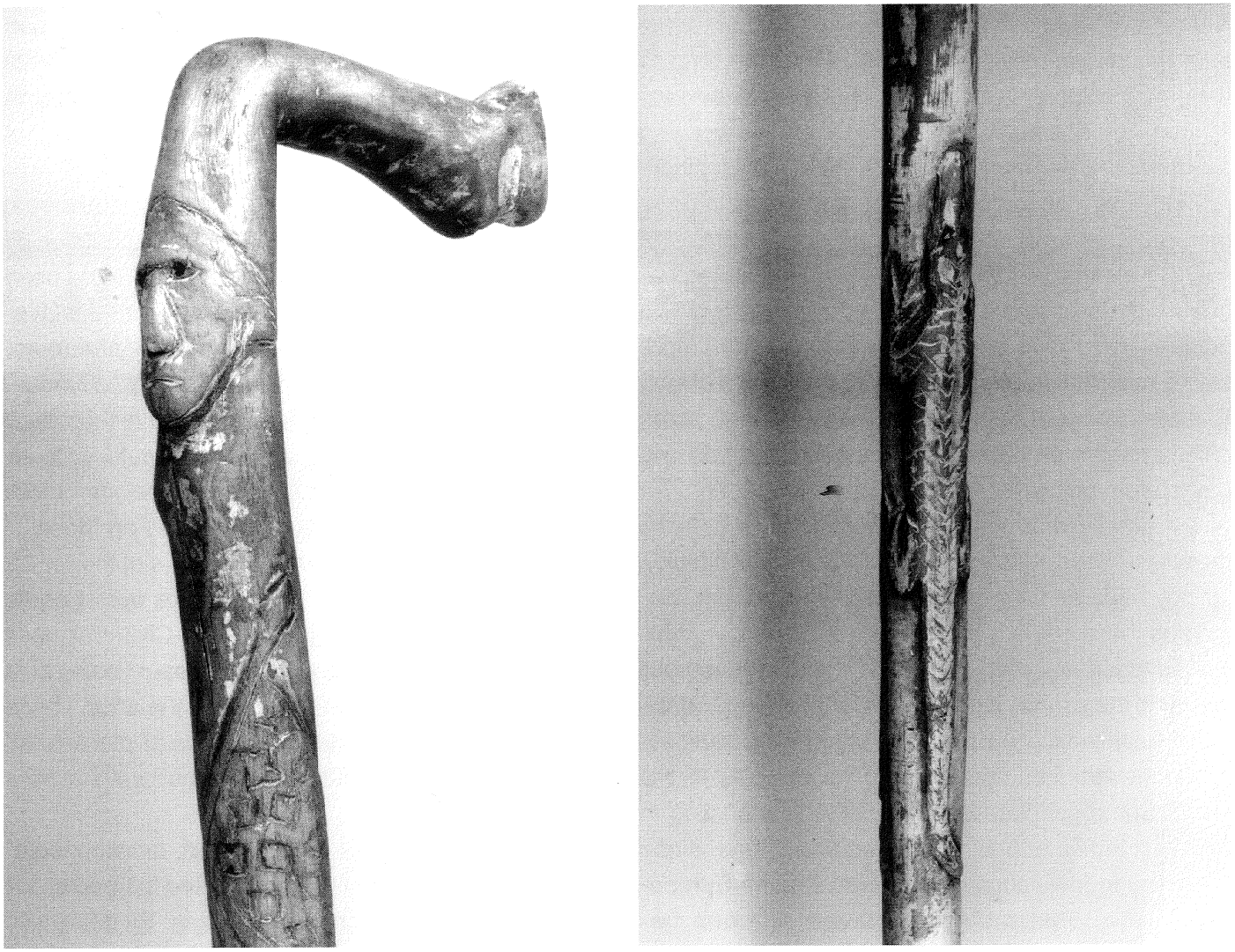
Records of enslaved ironworkers go back as far as the 1700s. In a rural society, someone had to make the shoes for the horses, the hoes for agriculture, and the axes for chopping down trees and chopping wood. Enslaved African-Americans also made guns. Some of the guns found their way into the hands of other enslaved African-Americans during the various rebellions. Two enslaved blacksmiths made many weapons used in Denmark Vesey's rebellion in 1822, including swords, pikes, and bayonets. Scholar John Michael Vlatch points out that the whites gave the craftsmen lots of practice making spears. Ornamental spearheads adorn the tops of many fences.

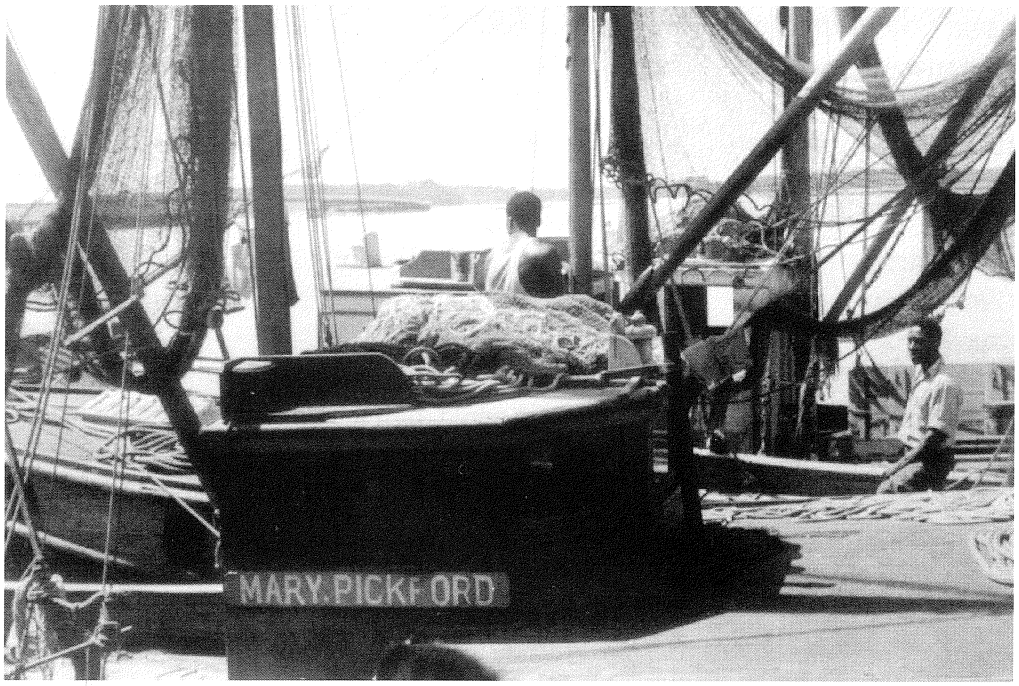
Enslaved African-Americans created much of the ornamental ironwork for which Charleston and New Orleans are famous. They probably did the actual work even when the white owners did the design. The Sword Gate in Charleston was designed by Christopher Werner. He owned five black artisans and employed five whites. One of the enslaved artisans, Toby Richardson, was known for his high quality work. Because of his skill, he probably played a role in creating this beautiful gate.

Many African-Americans worked under white supervision and used European designs. But by the mid-1800s, about twenty-five percent of Charleston's black ironworkers were free. African-American ironworkers still dominated the profession in the years after the Civil War. They shod horses and fixed wagon wheels in addition to crafting decorative ironwork. The tradition has been carried on to the present day in Charleston with the work of the renowned Philip Simmons. We will look at Simmons' work in a later chapter.

Many Africans were skilled boaters. Enslaved Africans who could man the boats were valued highly. Many enslaved Africans came from communities

Two pictures of a cane, made sometime in the late 1800s, anonymous. Note the detail of the work. Walking sticks with unique carved designs were a part of everyday life, yet art at the same time. Reproduced with permission of Louanne LaRouche. From "Conflict and Transcendence: African-American Art in South Carolina," organized by the Columbia Museum of Art.





Africans brought to America brought with them skills in boating and fishing. Many enslaved Africans were called upon to use these skills. After freedom came, they continued the tradition. These fishermen are working on their gear in a 1939 photo at St. Helena Island. Library of Congress LC-USF33 30432-M2.

where fishing was a way of life. They brought valuable boatmaking skills with them. While we tend to think of Native Americans building canoes, African-Americans also built them. Both Indians and Europeans knew how to make a boat from a single log. However, double log canoes have been a common sight along the African coast for hundreds of years. Africans use them for fishing. Double log canoes consist of several logs joined together. The double log boats built in Africa were larger and more stable than the single log boats built by the Indians. Enslaved African-Americans carried on the tradition, building boats on the plantations and often painting them bright colors.

Africans picked up additional boatmaking skills along the way to South Carolina. Africans in the West Indies quickly became fishermen, a respected occupation. Indians there made raft like boats of several logs attached together, called "pirogues." The pirogues were similar to the canoes found in West Africa. Once again, it is impossible to be sure of the origins of a tradition. Similar techniques existed in different parts of the world. Some scholars believe that Africans living in the West Indies adopted the pirogue's design. Since not many Indians survived the arrival of the Europeans in the West Indies, enslaved Africans became the boat builders. The use of these boats spread to the east coast of the United States. In the 1700s and 1800s, enslaved African-Americans in South Carolina were building boats of a similar style out of cypress.

Few roads existed in some of the coastal areas. African-American oarsmen provided transportation by guiding boats from one place to another. Some used dugout boats as a means of escape from enslavement. In the early 1700s, some fled by boat through the swamps of South Carolina and Georgia to Florida. There, in 1738, the Spanish governor gave them land near St. Augustine. A fort and a town were built. Although its real name was "Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose," most people called it Fort Mose.

The dugouts may be the ancestors of the racing canoes built after the Civil War and the oyster boats still used today. The dugouts of pre-Civil War days may also be the ancestors of the "bateaux" being built today by African-Americans in the Sea Islands. These modern-day boats are built of boards or planks. But they have many similarities to those built several hundred years ago.

As this book was being written, an archaeologist was building a replica of one of the flat-bed boats at Middleton Plantation in Charleston. By doing this

he hoped to learn more about how these boats were originally made. Unfortunately, the builders did not expect to try it out in the river. However, a television documentary was to be made on the project. Perhaps this effort will shed some light on the work of the African-Americans who built such boats long ago.

Food and Its Preparation

Everyone likes to eat. One of the joys of living in America is experiencing the variety of foods and the different ways to cook it. Food preparation is an art we all can enjoy. American food and cooking styles are a blend of cultures. Each ethnic group has brought certain foods and styles of cooking to America's shores. Okra, sesame seeds, black-eyed peas or cowpeas, and watermelon are among the foods which originated in Africa. Nut soups and fish stews were first enjoyed in Africa. Gumbo, both the word and the dish, is African. The yam is an African plant and an African word, from the Wolof language.

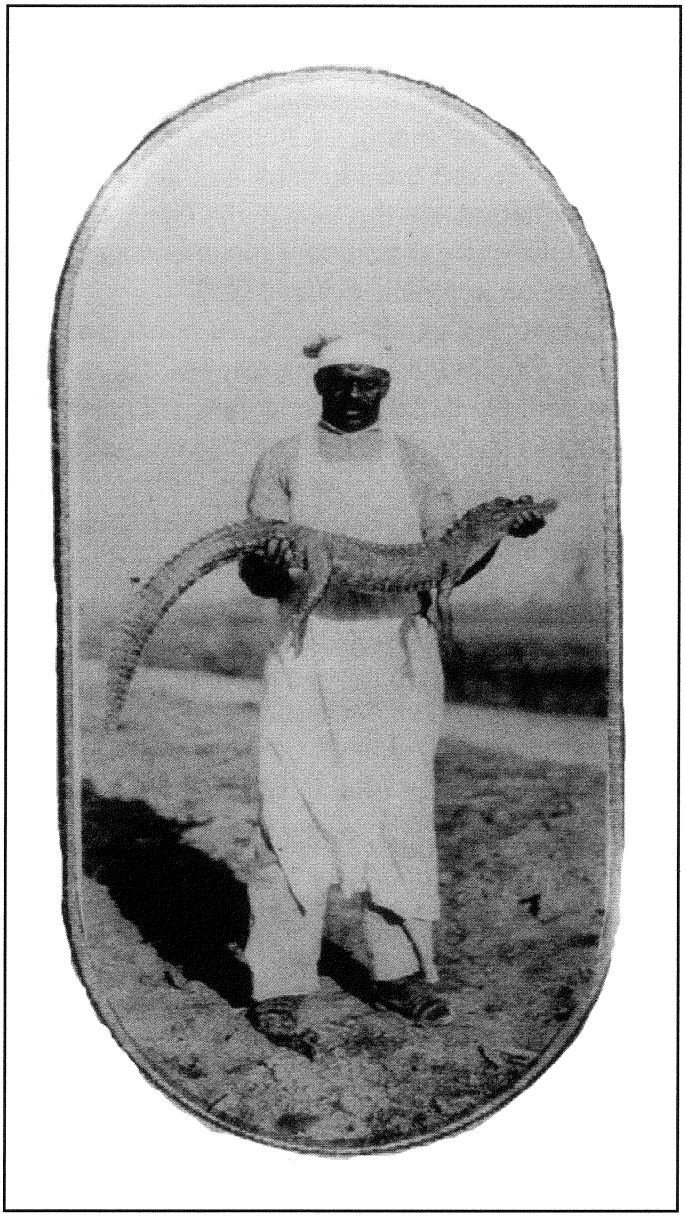
Food from other cultures also influenced Africans. Chili peppers and tomatoes, for example, became a part of African cooking. Explorers and traders from America brought them to Africa. The African diet included a number of different types of grains, which were cooked into breads, cereals, pancakes, and puddings. Africans ate a wide variety of vegetables. African influence may have led the Europeans to include more vegetables in their diet after enslavement began. After all, Africans and their descendants were doing a great deal of the cooking.

There was little meat in the West African diet. People usually ate some kind of a grain, such as rice or maniac, with a sauce made from boiled vegetables, such as eggplant, baobab, or beans. Some of these became part of the African-American diet in the New World. They also became part of the white Southern diet. Another grain, sorghum, which may be African, was boiled and made into bread by Africans.

The main dish would be cooked in a large iron or earthenware pot. It was placed on the floor. People would sit around it and eat, picking up food and dipping it into a spicy vegetable relish. They would drink from a gourd or bowl. These same eating patterns were later found among the African-American people on the Carolina coast. They were more isolated from European influences. Europeans, on the other hand, usually used utensils and cooked their food in metal pots. They served their food in wooden trays called trenchers. However, Europeans had begun to use ceramic dishes by the early 1700s. Enslaved African-Americans used both gourds and iron pots, depending on what was available.

Despite the wealth of foods to which their ancestors had been accustomed, enslaved African-Americans did not eat a very balanced diet. On the slave ships, beans and rice were staples. Occasionally the enslaved people were given fruits and vegetables. Meat was not a regular part of their diet.

Nutcake vendor. This street vendor proudly shows her wares of homemade nutcakes, a very popular item for those passing by in the early 1900s. Courtesy of Col. Robert I. Karrer, the S.C. Postcard Archive, South Caroliniana Library, USC.



Dinner anyone? African-American cooks learned to cook with whatever foods were available—perhaps even an occasional alligator! The spices and cooking techniques they brought from Africa and passed down through generations created a distinctive style of cooking. Courtesy of Dorothy M. Hucks, the S.C. Postcard Archive, South Caroliniana Library, USC.

The diet would usually improve somewhat after the Africans were brought to the New World and readied for sale.

The diet on the plantation would have varied depending on the owner's whim and resources. However, even in the best situations, there is no reason to think the enslaved Africans feasted. They often added to their limited diet by hunting, fishing, gardening, and gathering in their limited free time. Former enslaved African-American Jacob Stoyer related that when he was a child on a plantation, enslaved children were fed corn flour, which they called mush, and sour milk called hard crabber. Even though the mush was sweetened with molasses, the children disliked it. The crabber was far more popular. By comparison, a Sunday meal was a treat. Rice, bacon, and cowpeas were all cooked together. This simple and nutritious dish was called "hoppin' John." It is popular today throughout South Carolina.

The foods and cooking that developed were a combination of those of Africans and of Native Americans. Rice and corn became staples of the diet. In some areas rice alone was the staple. In other communities, white settlers may have considered rice too expensive for the enslaved. In these places whites sold rice for income. Corn, a Native American contribution to the diet, was cheap. The enslaved Africans adopted many of the Indian ways of cooking it. The idea of cornmeal mush, or boiling corn, probably was African. Corn is not a complete protein by itself, so the enslaved people needed beans or meat if they were to have adequate nutrition. Beans and meat were often lacking. What meat they had was usually fatty, tough, and often not well preserved.

The tradition of cooking food for a long time and adding a little meat for flavor is certainly African. This became a tradition among later generations of all Southerners. Some vegetables that became popular among African-Americans and white Southerners, such as turnips, cabbage, and collards, came from Europe. In some cases, African styles of cooking were adapted to the American environment with its different plants. In Africa, food was sometimes wrapped in banana leaves and cooked in the ashes of the fire. In America, cabbage leaves were substituted. Highly spiced food was popular in Africa. Plantation cooks continued this tradition. Today this kind of cooking is popular among both blacks and whites.

Until recently, little was known about the lifestyle of the enslaved African-Americans. Archaeologists have begun to excavate in the areas where they had their homes. They have discovered that enslaved

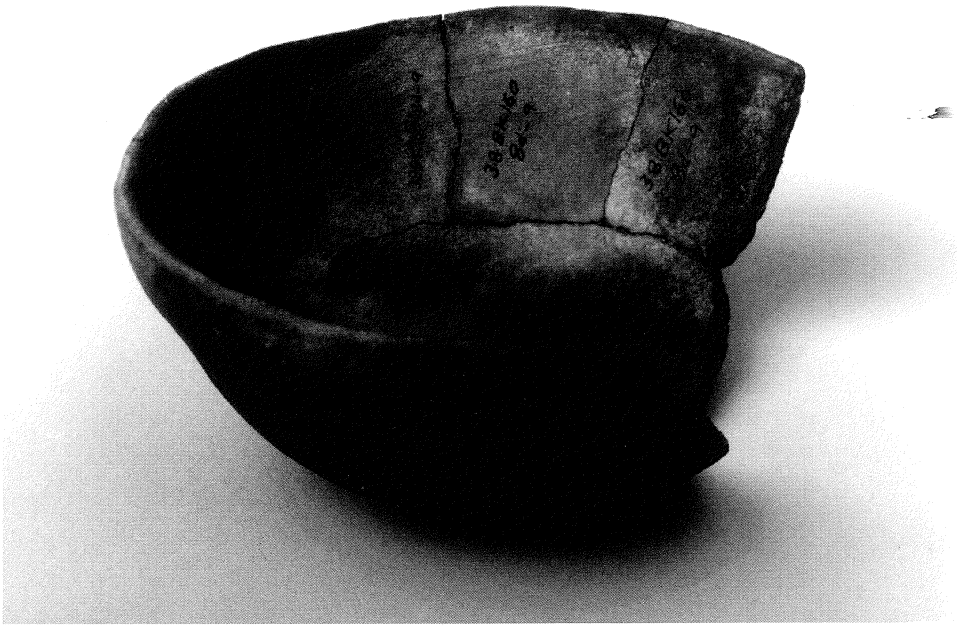
African-Americans usually cooked outside and ate on the floor like their African ancestors. Of course, outdoor cooking made sense for people who lived in warm climates.

Food was often cooked in a kind of earthenware pot. Today we call these pots "colonoware." Most of the colonoware that archaeologists have found was made before the mid-1800s. Commercial pottery became widely available after then. If you take a pottery making class, your pots will probably be fired in a closed oven, or kiln. Colonoware was different. It was fired on an open hearth. Colonoware was not usually decorated with designs or patterns, but often there was a symbol, a cross or an "X," sometimes placed on a circle, found on the bottoms of the bowls. This symbol is like the "cosmograms," or religious symbols, found among the Bakongo culture in what is now Zaire. Many of the people brought to South Carolina came from this region of Africa.

Food was cooked slowly in the colonoware pots. The pots added a unique flavor to the food. For a long time, researchers thought that Native Americans made these hand-built pots and sold them to the enslaved Africans. The style is quite similar to those used by Native Americans. Some scholars began to be suspicious when they discovered that many of these flat-bottomed pieces were similar to those made in Africa today! For example, a jug found in an American river looked like the jugs people are still making in Nigeria. People may have brought some pieces found in American on ships from Africa. Pots would have been needed to hold water and for storage purposes on the ships.

Some traditions from the West Indies were probably mixed with those of the Africans. In the early 1700s, nearly one-third of those enslaved were Indians. Pottery making was common in the West Indies. Free Native Americans may have provided information to the African-Americans about where to find good clay. Enslaved Africans also may have used some of the Indians' pots. Archaeologists think that the large colonoware pots they have found were used mainly for cooking, not storage. Some of the small pots were probably used to fix sauces and relishes similar to those enjoyed in Africa. Enslaved African-Americans probably used iron pots to boil their grain. Unlike pottery, iron pots heat up and cool down quickly. Earthenware pots are good for cooking food that is meant to simmer, to cook slowly for a long time.

Archaeologists excavating the remains of enslaved Africans' homes have now found many examples of colonoware pots. There is also evidence of children imitating their parents and making toys, small pots, and figures, as well as real pots which could be



Colonoware Bowl, maker unknown, made sometime between 1790 and 1830 of low-fired clay. Reproduced with permission of the S.C. Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology. From "Conflict and Transcendence: African-American Art in South Carolina" organized by the Columbia Museum of Art.

used for cooking and storing food. Our understanding of these aspects of their life and culture is still quite limited. We have just begun to study it seriously.

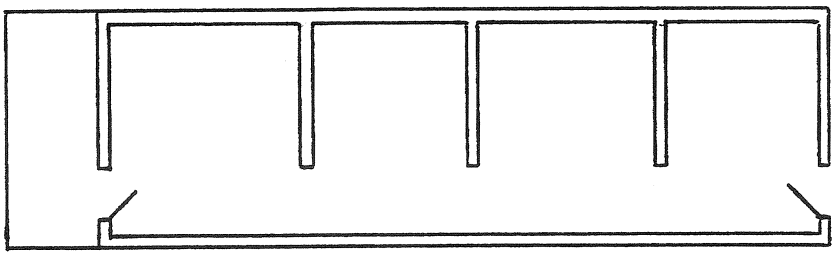
Architecture

Many African influences are found in American architecture. Africans brought familiar styles of building to the New World, both to the Caribbean and the mainland of North America. Carrying over familiar traditions of building seems logical. Enslaved Africans were often left to themselves to build their own homes. Among the housing features which are African in origin or African-influenced are the type of roofs (thatched with gables), type of walls (a clay mixture), dirt floors, small room size, rectangular shape of houses, and the front porch. Their housing styles were ideal for their climate and life style because they were not difficult to build or to rebuild when they moved. A central fire or hearth was good for keeping insects out before the invention of screens.

The enslaved Africans who were brought to South Carolina found themselves living in a familiar climate. Building houses similar to those that worked well in a warm, humid climate across the sea made sense. In a time when there was no such thing as air-conditioning, you would not spend much time indoors. Therefore you would not need a very large house. Scholars studying African culture today have found many similarities between houses built in Africa and those built in America by Africans. Some masters knew and objected to enslaved Africans building "African" houses on their plantations. But many whites were doubtless unaware that both enslaved and free blacks may have merely been following African traditions when they built their houses. There are records of enslaved Africans building one-room homes, often with thatched roofs. They claimed these were like their African homes. In the South Carolina Sea Islands, people often built homes with thatched roofs well into the early 1900s.

The tradition of thatched roofs was familiar to Africans who taught the technique to their children. The "mud walls," actually a clay plaster, were found in many homes even when wood was available. The "wattle-and-daub" walls, as the technique is called, are found in the same area of Africa as the other architectural techniques we are discussing. These wattle-and-daub walls and thatched roofs with gables were common among enslaved Africans in Haiti as well. They were also found in rural Europe and among Native Americans. So we cannot say for sure which tradition influenced African-Americans home-building styles. Several rural peoples had a similar tradition. However, African-Americans handed down from par-

Many types of building displayed African influence, including this small "critter barn" photographed in the 1930s. Reproduced from Constance B. Schulz, Ed., The *History* of S.C. Slide Collection, *slide H-16 (Sandlapper Publishing Company, 1989). Courtesy of South Caroliniana Library.*



Sketch of typical floor plan of a "shotgun" style house with a small porch on the front. They can still be seen around the state today. One of the most frequent places they can be found are in what used to be mill villages built around textile mills.

ent to child the knowledge of how to build this kind of house. Enslaved Africans who crossed the ocean in chains must have carried such knowledge with them.

Many enslaved African-Americans chose to use dirt floors even when floorboards were an option. Both rural Europeans and Africans had developed techniques of making a hard floor by mixing clay with other substances. This is another example of how people living thousands of miles apart can find similar solutions to similar problems! Again, the origins of the approach used by African-Americans is unclear.

We have already described the tradition of building small houses like those in West Africa. Like the West African homes, African-American houses had small rooms without windows. African rooms were usually square, with sides of 10 feet on the average. African houses often had two rooms. Enslaved African-Americans, of course, did not always have the option of building two rooms. The rooms they did have were usually about the same size and style as those found among the Yoruba people in West Africa.

The Yoruba people often lived in compounds. Compounds are groups of houses located close to each other. The Yoruba were one of the earliest and largest groups of Africans to arrive in the New World. So they may have influenced the building methods adopted by those arriving later. Indeed, enslaved African-Americans often lived in groups of houses on plantations that seem very similar to the compounds of the Yoruba. We can still find compounds in relatively remote places like St. Helena Island.

Houses were typically rectangular in shape. Again, these are very similar to those found all along the coast of West Africa. These long, narrow houses were found among African-Americans for generations after the Civil War as well. This style, often referred to as the "shotgun house," seems to be at least partially African in origin. It may have come to the mainland by way of Haiti. Shotgun houses are long houses with several rooms in a row. These houses lack the hallway that many people are accustomed to. To get from one end of this rectangular house to the other, you would have to walk through all the rooms of the house. This design forces people into fairly close contact with each other. If they do not like that contact, they have to go outside. Perhaps this style developed among people who were comfortable living close to their relatives in a compound. The house received its name because it was said that you could stand at one end of the house and shoot a shotgun through to the other end.

Most people would be surprised to learn as they sit on their front porch, sipping a cool drink on a warm night, that they have African-Americans to thank for this wonderful innovation. Homes in Europe simply did not have porches like those found in the United States. The early homes built in the American South lacked this innovation. The front porch may have arrived by way of the Caribbean. The style did not become popular until Haitian refugees came to Charleston in the late 1700s. Large side porches were adopted there. A version of the porch, the veranda, was popular in both the Caribbean and in Africa, where there were many long, hot days. Enslaved African-Americans may have added porches to their houses long before their masters did so. The large front porches were uncommon in white society until the 1800s.

Survival of Cultural Traditions

In this chapter, we have introduced you to many of the crafts and cultural traditions that Africans brought with them when they came to the New World. In many cases, the origins have long since been forgotten. However, some of the traditions survive. In some cases, African traditions have joined with European and Native American traditions to form a unique Southern American culture with multiple origins.